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Pragmatic aspects of coherence in discourse.

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Foreword.

The two main aspects of discourse are organization and content. The subject of the present investigation is coherence, that is, connectedness of content. Those aspects of discourse organization which have little or no bearing on content, will be all but disregarded for that reason. The turnsystem, for example, will appear to be such an aspect (see ch. 3).

Throughout, the viewpoint will be taken here that theory is interesting so far as it serves description and makes us aware of aspects of reality that otherwise would remain hidden. The material description and analysis is central. Theory that cannot be made to fit description or shed any light on relevant aspects of natural discourse, will be left aside. Not the least reason for this is that it will be attempted to describe the process of discourse as it develops in the interaction of the participants. Static and a-prioristic categories of description will therefore be of little use. They will be discussed in that light and, if possible, adapted, or otherwise discarded. We will try to follow the discourse participants: what they say, how they appear to interpret and connect, how they formulate as they do and why, how they estimate each other's background, knowledge, abilities and attitudes.

There are quite a few other reasons for making theory dependent on analysis in the domain of discourse. As we can see in many a contribution to textlinguistics, theory has often been based on so called clear cases, on fictitious examples or formal uses of language. It is therefore not surprising that such theory has not provided us with a set of adequate descriptive categories for dealing with ordinary discourse, as will be shown in the first few chapters. Definitions based on textlinguistic theory proffer insight that is not seldom in conflict with findings, ideas, and concepts advanced in more descriptively oriented disciplines like ethnography, ethnomethodological sociology, anthropology, and so on. This will be seen to be the case with, for example, the notion of topic.

Theories like the latter aim at a more direct relationship between observable entities on the one hand and theoretical implementation and explanation on the other.

We will try then to develop in this book a dynamic model of discourse analysis, and apply this to coherence. A set of hypotheses concerning coherence will be formulated, tested in the description of a lengthy fragment of conversation (ch. 5), and discussed in detail in the last chapter.

If I have been too harsh with regard to some ideas or theories or proponents of these, perhaps the following quotation from Kuhn (1977) may be mitigating:

"Proponents of different theories speak different languages - languages expressing different cognitive commitments, suitable for different worlds. Their abilities to grasp each other's viewpoints are therefore inevitably limited by the imperfections of the processes of translation and of reference determination."

In the last resort there is only one criterion by which a theory

or theoretical notion can be judged: it works or it does not work, i.e. it describes (and predicts) relevant phenomena or it does not. My contention is that it is possible to describe various types of pragmatic coherence with the present model, and even, to a certain extent, predict how they can be expected to show up in natural discourse. No doubt many improvements can be proposed. They are welcome.

Many thanks are due to Simon Dik and Ton van der Geest, who were at various stages prepared to read this work, suggest improvements and advise me as to which course to take. They probably would not like to, but certainly should not, be held responsible for the result.

Typing out the manuscript in Wordstar is one thing, but converting it into Wordperfect in order to have it printed decently quite another. With the latter activity Tjalling de Vries (Computerafdeling Letteren) was most helpful.

D.H.

The numbers between square brackets refer to footnotes